

# A HISTORY OF SYRIA IN ONE HUNDRED SITES

edited by

**Youssef Kanjou and Akira Tsuneki**

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Cover Illustration: View of the excavation at Hummal site  
© The Syro-Swiss mission on the Palaeolithic of the El Kowm Area

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## 79. Palmyra, 30 Years of Syro-German/Austrian Archaeological Research (Homs)

Andreas Schmidt-Colinet

(University of Vienna, Austria)

Khaled al-As'ad and Waleed al-As'ad

(DGAM, Syria)

### 1. Tomb no. 36 and other temple-tombs (Figs. 1-4)

The temple- or house-like tomb no. 36 is situated in the centre of so-called 'Valley of the Tombs'. With about 18m length from edge to edge and about 300 graves (*loculi*), it is the largest representative of this palace-like type of tombs at Palmyra. The architectural decoration of the building allows a dating to about 210 to 230 AD. Furthermore the tomb can be attributed probably to the family of the famous *Iulius Septimius Aurelius Vorodes*.

The documentation of the more than 700 fallen blocks of the ruin enables us to draw an exact reconstruction of the building. The architecture documents a fusion

of different traditions as well as the grandiose will of the buildings commissioner: The palace-like facade of the entrance contrasts with the square, two-storey and uncovered peristyle courtyard in the centre of the structure. Design and metrology of the building reveal at every point Roman principles of design, brought into line with oriental taste.

The themes and the stylistic evidence of the architectural sculpture prove close relations with foreign sarcophagi workshops on the Syrian coast and their connections to Roman art: Dionysos-Baalshamin sitting in the vineyards, nereids and erotes riding on dolphins, sea-monsters holding a shell between them, victories,

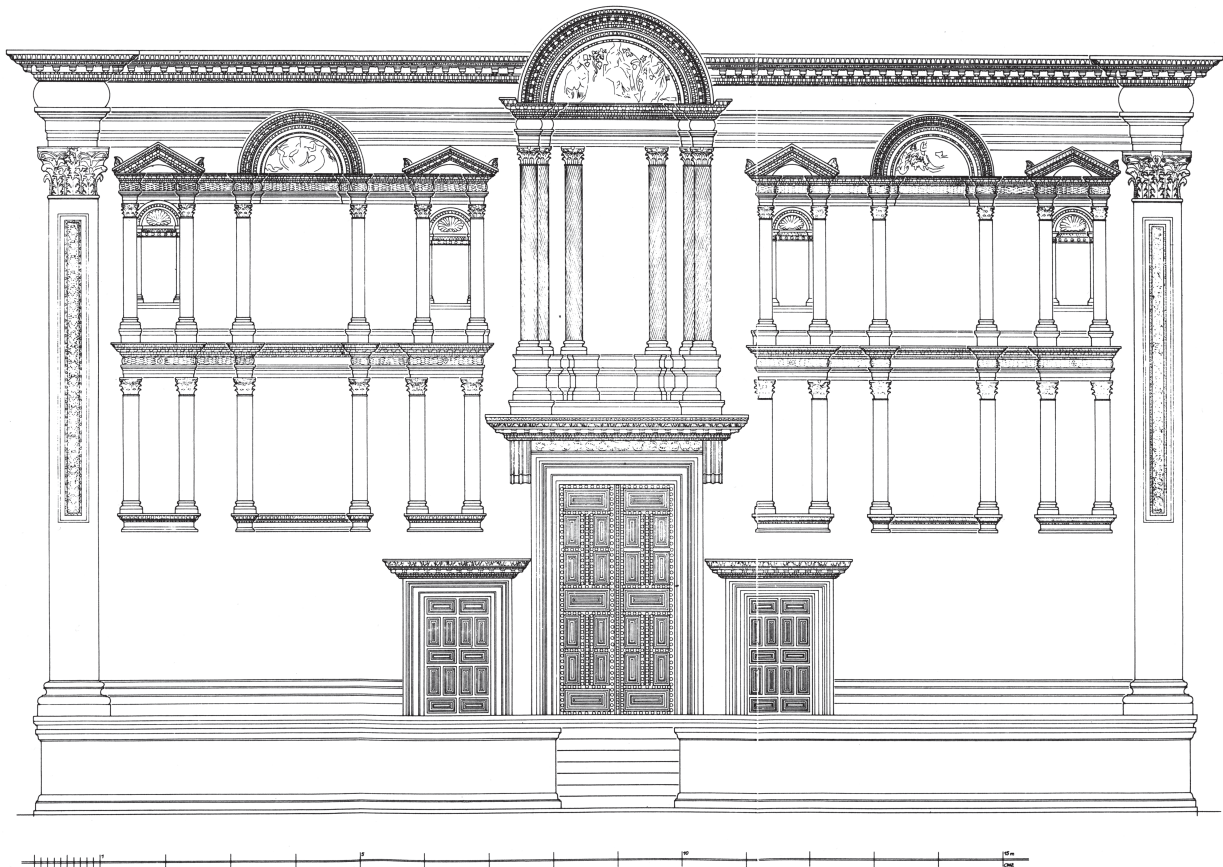


FIG. 1 PALMYRA: TOMB NO 36, RECONSTRUCTED ENTRANCE FACADE.



A HISTORY OF SYRIA IN ONE HUNDRED SITES

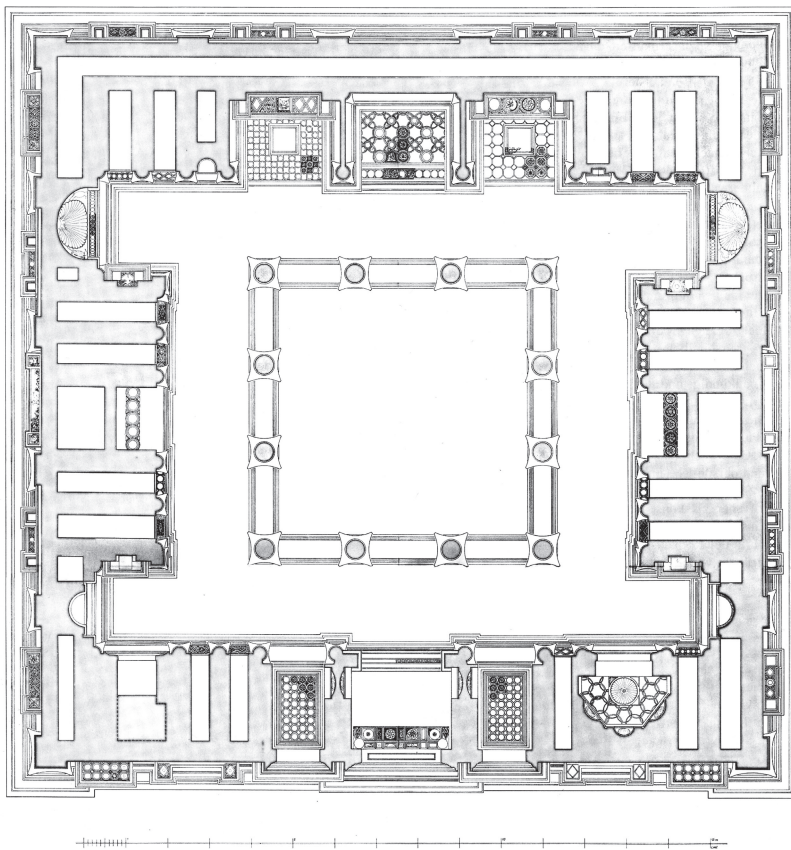


FIG. 2 PALMYRA: TOMB NO. 36, RECONSTRUCTED GROUND PLAN.



FIG. 3 PALMYRA: TOMB NO. 36, ARCHITECTURAL SCULPTURE.



FIG. 4 ROME: VILLA ALBANI, ROMAN SARCOPHAGUS.



winged Medusas, tragic masks. On the other hand, the exceptionally rich architectural decoration of highest quality was worked out by local workshops and enables us to reconstruct pattern books which partly can be traced back to native textile patterns.

The sarcophagi and grave reliefs, which again stand in local tradition, give much new information about costumes and adornments of the Palmyrene upper class of the 3rd century AD. The small finds, such as pottery, lamps etc., again prove relations with workshops outside Palmyra. The osteo-archaeological evaluation of skeleton finds enables us for the first time to make a cautious demographic projection of the population structure of ancient Palmyra.

All in all, the architecture of the building and its decoration, as well as the archaeological finds of the grave sites, reveal to us in detail a very complex historical reality of interrelations and interdependences over which ancient literary sources give almost no information: The increasing contact with the Roman world at the same time stimulated and encouraged indigene local traditions and forces. Thus, the phenomenon usually called 'Romanization' can be understood as well as a process of 're-orientalization'.

The other tombs of this type were studied carefully without any excavation. Thus, it was possible to reconstruct the facades of many of these tombs in drawings. Furthermore the so-called 'Aviation Tomb' (no. 186) in the south-east necropolis was cleaned, restored and studied. After restoration the tomb was opened for public visitors.

Finally, concerning research on Palmyrene funerary sculpture two sarcophagi found by the Syrian mission were studied carefully: The one, placed nowadays in front of the museum, was completed with the horse standing on the left side of the lid.

## 2. The Quarries of Palmyra (Figs. 5-7)

The quarries of hard limestone that delivered the material for most of the sculptures and buildings of ancient Palmyra are situated about 15km northeast of the city. They are spread over several square kilometres and they were partly rediscovered only within the last few years. For the first time, the mission started a detailed cartographic mapping of the quarries, a study of the different techniques used for extraction, production and transport, as well as the investigation of the infrastructure of the people working in or living near the quarries. One of the quarries gives detailed information about the daily life and social environment of the workers: caves artificially enlarged were used as living quarters. The necessary amount of water supply was granted by a sophisticated system of water channels

and cisterns laid out all over the area. 'Dragon-houses' constructed of broken or rejected blocks were used as shelters for guardians and for storing working material. Graffiti on the walls of such structures reveal the names and professions of masons and quarry workers. Loading ramps distributed all over the quarries allow us to reconstruct the means of transport also known from sculptured representations: carts with a loading height of about 1m and pulled by bulls.

Many unfinished blocks left in the quarries, as well as the traces of tools on the quarry walls, give reliable information on the different methods used for extraction and for manufacturing the raw material. They testify a change of techniques and tools during the first half of the 2nd century AD. With the new technique it was possible to extract larger blocks with less effort and within a shorter time. Thus, there can be proved an interdependency and correlation between the building mentality at Palmyra, i.e. the building boom in the first half of the 2nd and the development of new methods of extraction and production.

Furthermore, the different traces of the tools give hints for a dating of otherwise undated buildings in the town and thus to clear up the chronology of the urban development of ancient Palmyra.

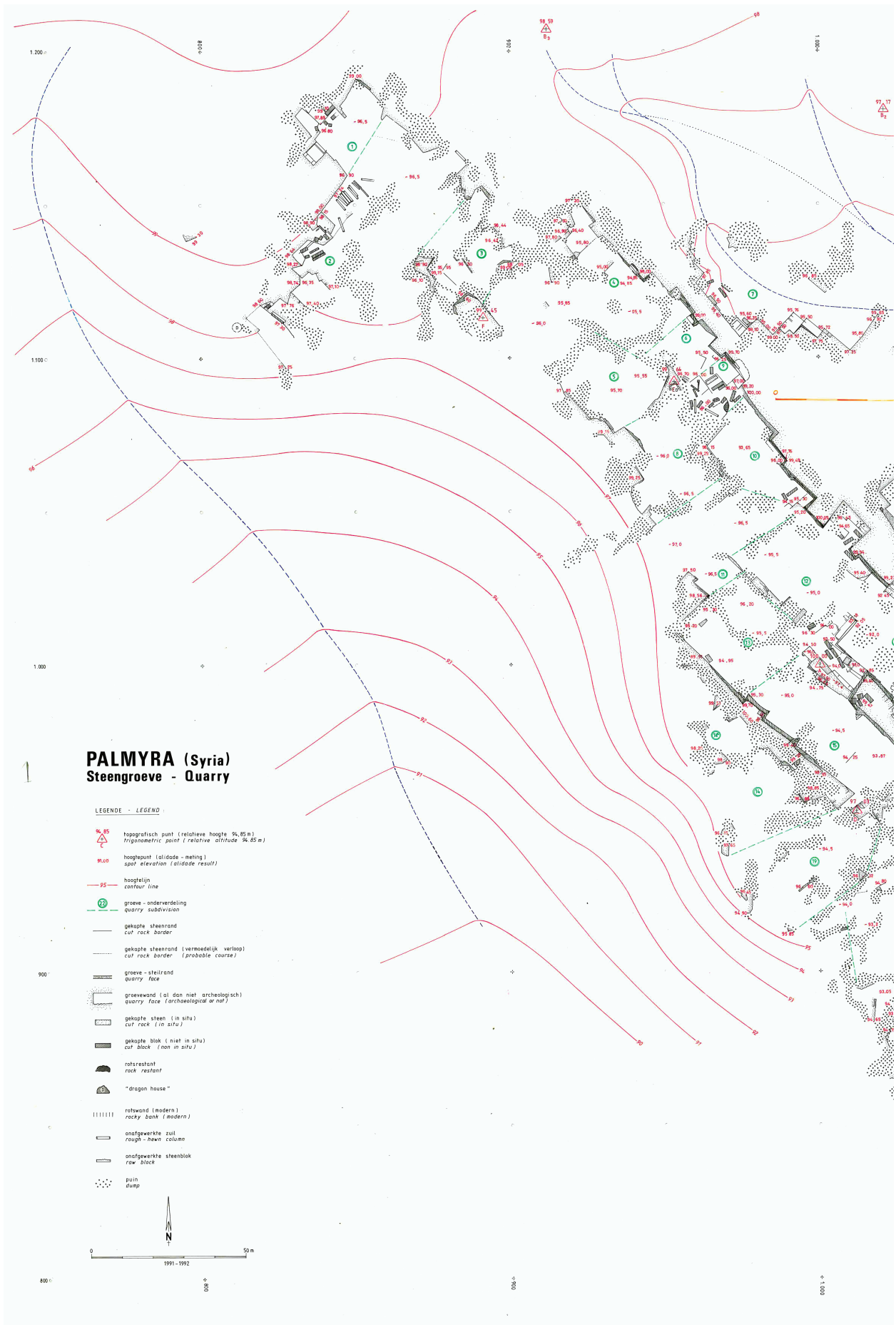
## 3. The Textiles from Palmyra (Figs. 8-11)

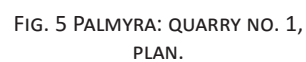
The more than 2000 textile fragments found in the tombs of Palmyra are one of the largest groups of antique textiles with proven origin. They all were found either as parts of mummies or as isolated fragments in so-called tower-tombs dated by inscriptions from the 1st century BC to the 2nd century AD. Within an international and interdisciplinary project, the textiles were cleaned, restored and documented. They are partly presented to the public in permanent exhibitions in the museums of Palmyra and Damascus. The textiles present an unusual amount of information about the history of Palmyra, i.e. economy and trade (silk route), daily life and culture as well as different burial customs (mummification) and religion.

Two groups of textiles can be distinguished: textiles of local production and fabrics imported from India and China. The locally produced fabrics are made of cotton, linen or wool, generally of outstanding high quality and with sophisticated designs. Wool was dyed in different colours from plants or animals. The dyestuffs were produced locally or imported from as far as from India. Silk fabrics were imported from China. Some of them can be attributed to certain imperial workshops due to in woven Chinese characters.

The designs found on the local Palmyrene textiles also appear on sculptures and buildings. Obviously the

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FIG. 6 PALMYRA: QUARRY NO. 1, COLUMNS.

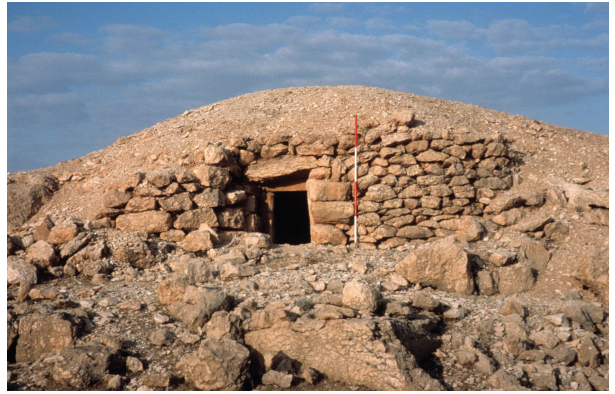


FIG. 7 PALMYRA: QUARRY NO. 3, 'DRAGON-HOUSE'.

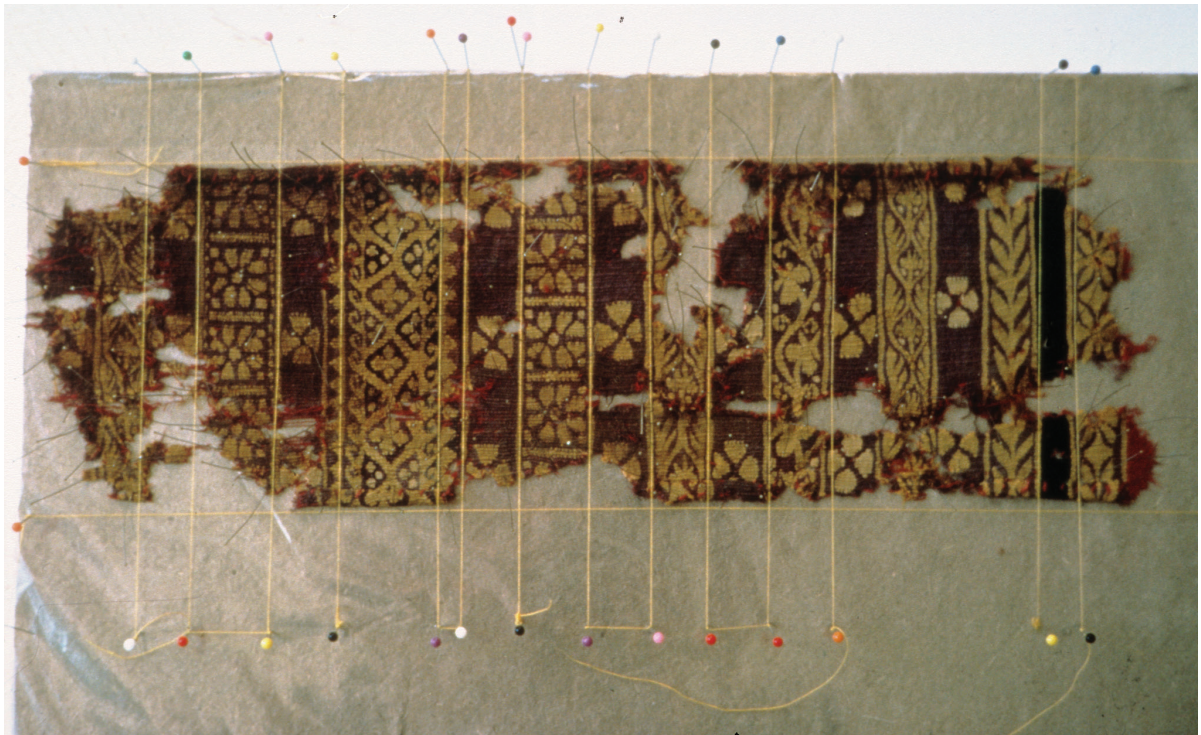


FIG. 8 PALMYRA: RESTORATION OF A TEXTILE, FROM THE TOWER-TOMB OF KITOT (40 AD).



FIG. 9 PALMYRA: LINEN SHAWL OF LOCAL PRODUCTION.



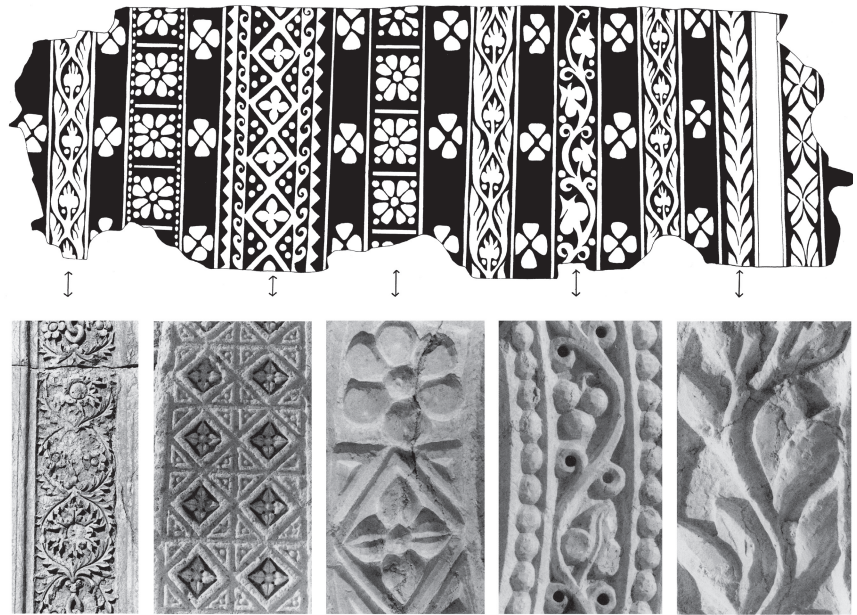


FIG. 10 PALMYRA: TEXTILE ORNAMENT OF AN ARCHITECTURAL DECORATION.



FIG. 11 PALMYRA: SILK FABRIC IMPORTED FROM CHINA, FROM THE TOWER-TOMB OF KITOT (40 AD).

same patterns were used in textile workshops, sculpture ateliers and in architectural workshops. Thus, the typical ‘arabesque’ architectural decoration of Palmyra largely can be traced back to patterns of local textiles.

#### 4. The Location of Pre-Roman Palmyra (3rd century BC to 3rd century AD) and the investigation of a ‘Khan’ (Figs. 12-16)

The location of the so-called Hellenistic town was thought to be situated outside the Roman town in the area south of the wadi of today for several reasons. By a geophysical prospection underground dwellings were made visible without any excavation within an area of about 20ha. Than two test trenches proved the location of the pre-Roman settlement in this area from the 3rd century BC onwards. The pottery finds confirm that the area was inhabited from the 3rd century BC up to the 3rd century AD. During the last years, a caravan building or residence of a caravan leader was excavated and studied. The extraordinary wall decoration of this building with paintings and stucco, as well as the huge amount of different small finds, give a vivid idea of the enormous wealth and of daily life of the people who took advantage of the far-reaching connections of Palmyrene trade. Furthermore, the small finds of this ‘khan’ prove the astonishing global trade connections – from Spain to China.

What is surprising is the chronology of the building. The khan was built only in the middle of the 1st century BC (i.e. shortly after the installation of the Roman province of Syria in 64 BC) and was destroyed at the end of the 3rd century AD, perhaps during the destruction of Palmyra by Aurelian in 273 AD.

The recently published first volume of the *Topographia Palmyrena* I ‘Atlas de Palmyre’ (Fig. 17), published in cooperation with an international team, looks likely to become a basic reference for further studies in this field.



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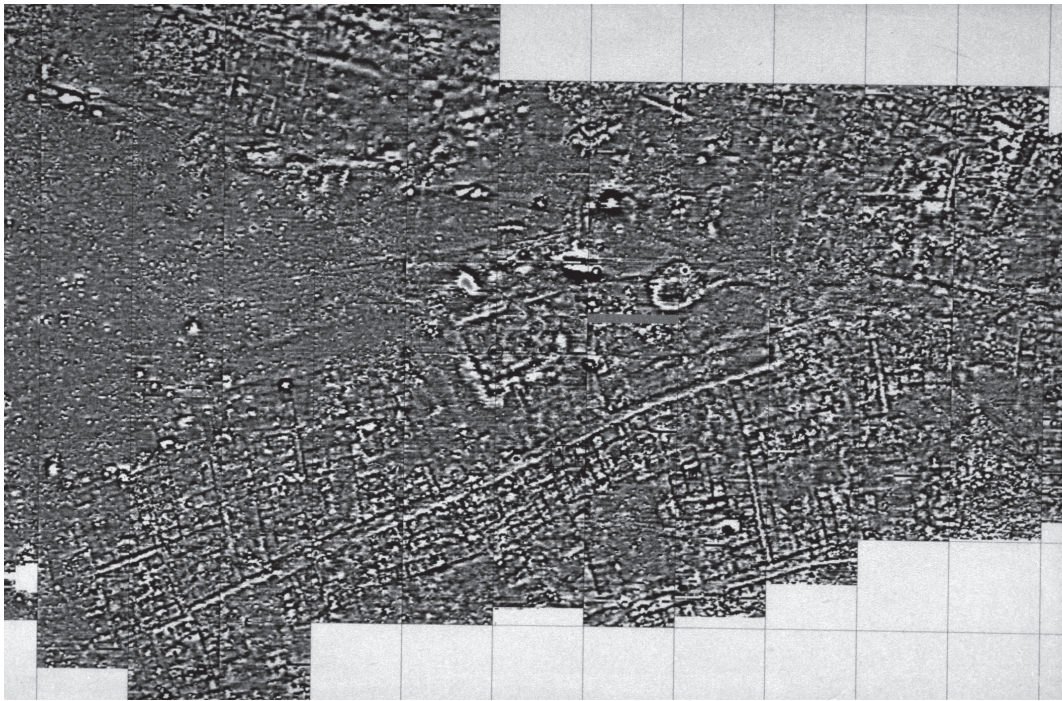


FIG. 12 PALMYRA:  
AREA OF THE  
'HELLENISTIC'  
TOWN,  
MAGNETOGRAM  
OF THE  
UNDERGROUND  
SETTLEMENT.



FIG. 13 PALMYRA: AREA OF THE  
'HELLENISTIC' TOWN, TEST TRENCH  
I, RHODIAN AMPHORA STAMP (3RD  
CENTURY BC).

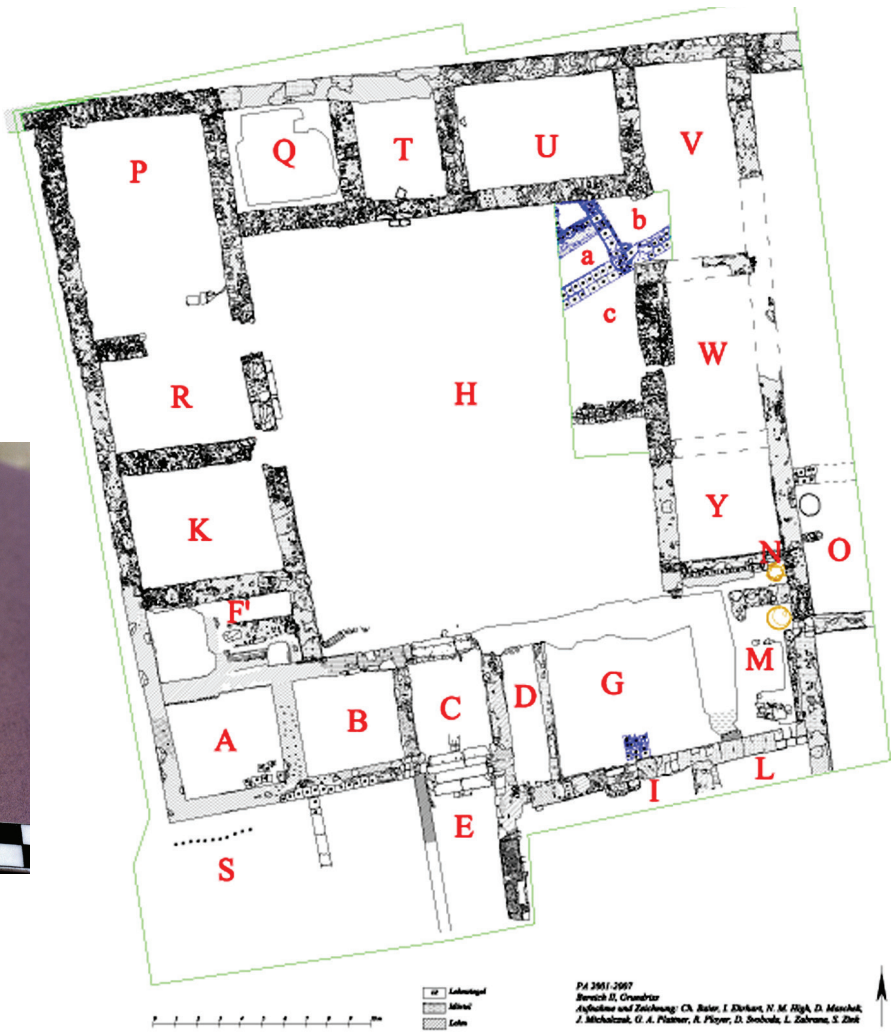


FIG. 14 PALMYRA: AREA OF THE 'HELLENISTIC' TOWN, 'KHAN', GROUND PLAN.



79. PALMYRA, 30 YEARS OF SYRO-GERMAN/AUSTRIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH (HOMS)



FIG. 15 PALMYRA: AREA OF THE 'HELLENISTIC' TOWN, 'KHAN', STUCCO FRAGMENT.

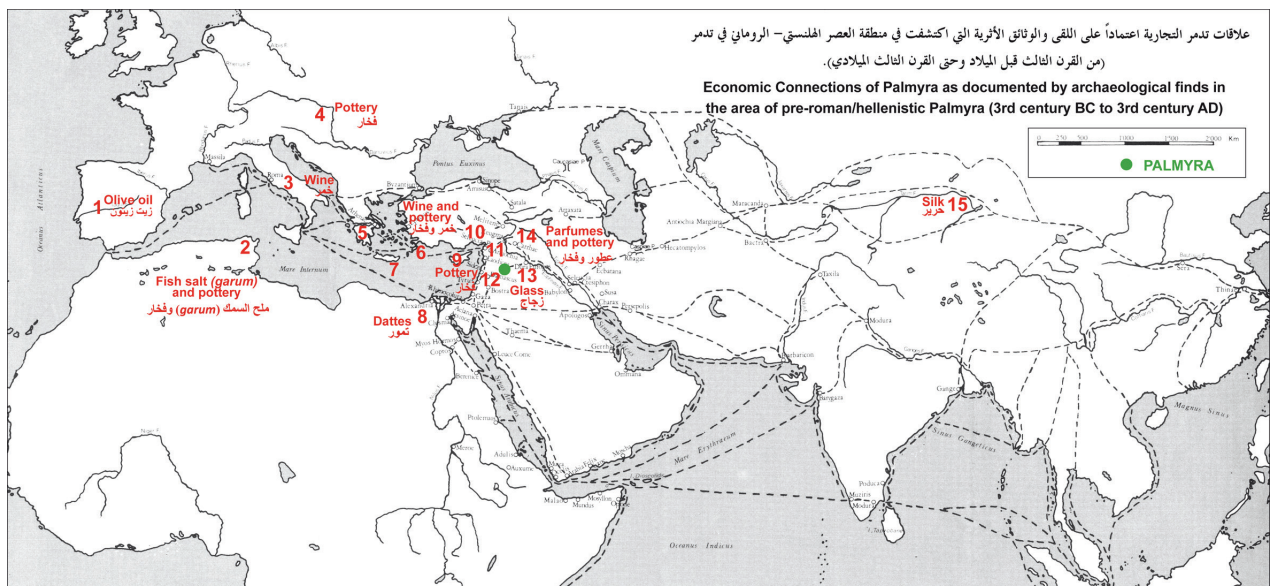


FIG. 16 MAP OF PALMYRA'S TRADE NETWORK, AS DOCUMENTED BY ARTEFACTS FOUND IN THE 'KHAN'.

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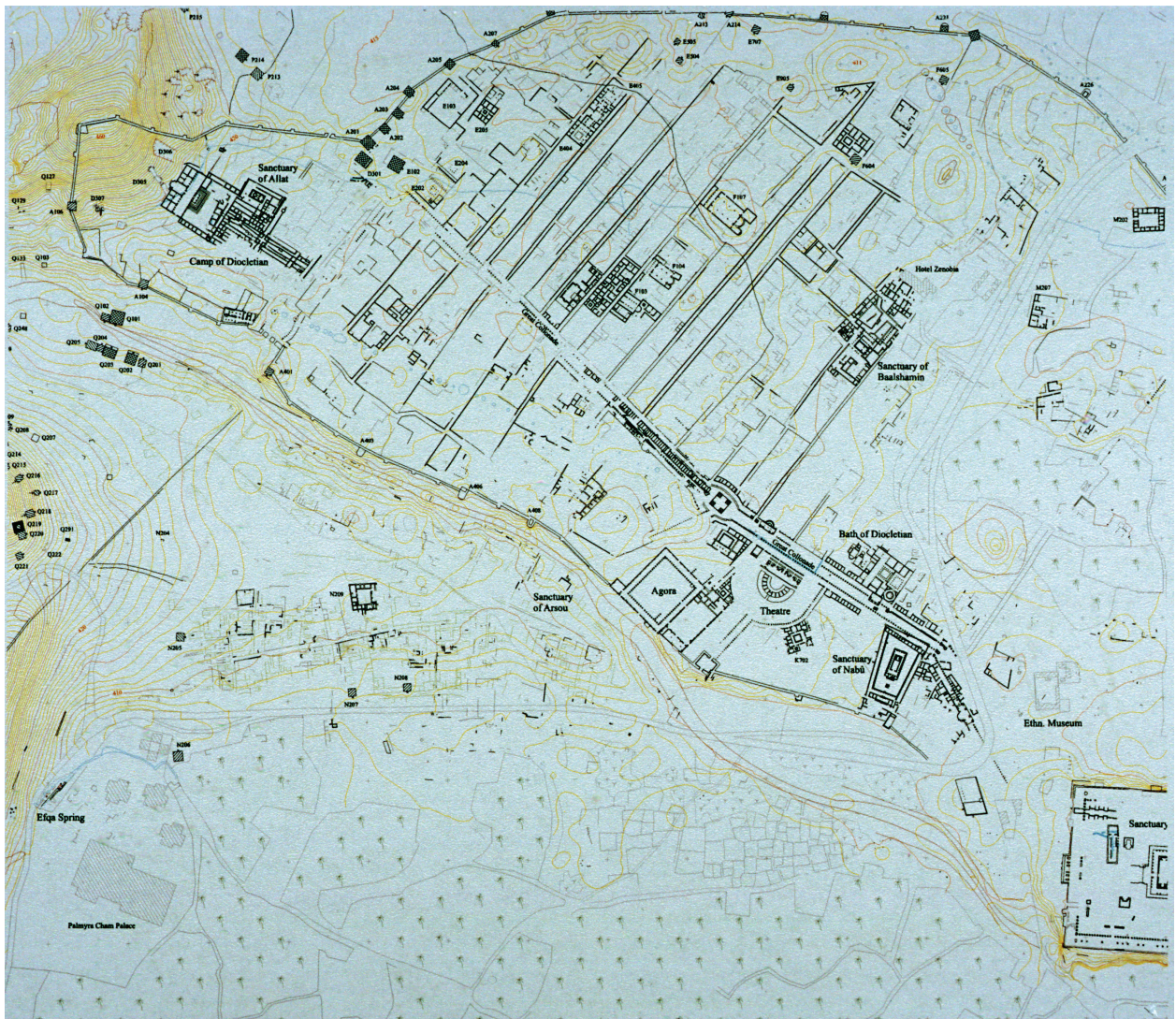


FIG. 17 'ATLAS DE PALMYRE', DETAIL  
(AFTER KLAUS SCHNÄDELBACH).